

DICTION

Diction: the words the writer chooses to convey a particular meaning. “Word Choice”.

Effective diction is shaped by words that are clear, concrete, and exact. Good writers avoid words like *pretty*, *nice*, and *bad* because the words are not specific enough. Instead, good writers rely on words that invoke a specific effect in order to bring the reader into the event being described.

Examples:

A coat isn't torn; it is *tattered*.

The United States Army does not want revenge; it is *thirsting* for revenge.

A door does not shut; it *thuds*.

Diction goes from “high to low” on the following levels:

Formal: “I am not sanguine about the decision of the Butler High School Board.”

Informal: “I am not optimistic about the school board’s decision.”

Conversational: “I’m not comfortable about the board’s decision.”

Colloquial: “I’m not cool with what the brass decided.”

Slang-y: “I’m ticked off at what the suits did.”

Vulgar: “I’m royally p-----.”

DICTION ACTIVITY.

1. Compose a half-page conversation, script-style, that would be a scholarly interview on the interviewee’s feelings toward school. The interview would be published in a highly-regarded, scholarly journal.
2. Compose a half-page conversation, script-style, between two college professors in their 50s as they discuss their feelings toward school.
3. Compose a half-page conversation, script-style, between two teenage friends as they discuss their feelings toward school.

An **author’s diction** depends on **subject, purpose, occasion, and audience** – IT IS CONTROLLED BY PURPOSE!

SUBJECT: The subject often determines how specific or sophisticated the diction needs to be. For example, articles on computers are filled with specialized language: e-mail, e-shopping, web, interface. Many topics generate special vocabularies to convey meaning.

PURPOSE: The writer’s purpose – *whether to persuade, entertain, inform* – determines diction. **Words chosen to impart a particular effect on the reader reflect the writer’s purpose.** For example, if an author’s purpose is to inform, the reader should expect straightforward diction. On the other hand, if the author’s purpose is to entertain, the readers will likely encounter words or phrases that are ironic, whimsical, or unexpected.

OCCASION: In what style of writing will your words be read? **Formal** diction is reserved for scholarly writing and serious texts. **Informal** diction is often used in narrative essays and newspaper editorials. **Colloquial** diction and **slang** are typically used to capture the language of a particular time frame or culture. **Vulgar** diction – “save it for the streets”.

AUDIENCE: The type of diction a writer uses depends on the audience (readers; listeners). An author who uses sophisticated diction knows he is writing for an intelligent audience. An author who uses more informal diction knows he is writing for an audience of varied intelligence.

How does one analyze diction?

1. Look for **specific words or short phrases** that seem stronger than the others. Diction is NEVER the entire sentence.
2. Look for a **pattern** (or similarity) in the words the writer chooses (Do the words imply sadness, happiness, etc.?). This pattern helps to create a particular kind of diction.
3. Look for **repetition** of the same words or phrases. Repeating the same word or phrase enables the reader to emphasize a point, feeling, etc.
4. When writing an essay in which you analyze the diction of a writer, **avoid stating**, "The writer used diction ...". Think about it: This is obvious, since diction IS the words on the page; without them, the page would be blank! :)

INSTEAD, say: "The writer creates _____ diction through the use of ..." OR "The language of the text is _____."

LET'S TRY IT.

- The author's name
- **plus** an adjective (such as sophisticated, varied, inventive, sparkling, effective, carefully crafted, flashy, colloquial, folksy). *Use a different adjective for each sentence.*
- **plus** the term "diction"
- **plus** a strong verb (such as: demonstrates, creates, emphasizes, generates, fulfills)
- **plus** the function of the word choices (what those choices **do** for the piece)
- **plus at least** two examples

Example: Andrist's snazzy diction recreates the dynamic personality of General Custer with choices such as "flamboyant" and "teetotaler."

Assignment: Taking a piece of writing we have studied in class, create a thesis statement using the above "formula" for any three pieces!